Newark case is not about illegal immigration

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

It was a horrific crime, the sort that calls out for justice - three college students senselessly murdered, with a fourth left for dead after being shot in the head.

But now a case in Newark, N.J., has become a rallying cry in the battle against illegal immigration. And that can't be good.

It all happened on Aug. 4, when three African-Americans were gunned down in a schoolyard near their homes, after being made to kneel execution-style facing a wall. The victims were 18-year-old Terrance Aeriel, 20-year-old Iofemi Hightower and 20-year-old Dashon Harvey. Aeriel's 19-year-old sister, Natasha, survived after being shot in the head.

This terrible deed was the work of at least five individuals, authorities say, including a few teenagers. But what's getting the headlines is that the alleged ringleader should never have been in this country in the first place.

That's because 28-year-old Jose Lachira Carranza is an illegal immigrant from Peru. At the time of the murders, he was out on $150,000 bail for which he only had to post $5,000, thanks to the help of a bail bondsman, despite pending indictments on multiple counts of aggravated assault and raping a 5-year-old girl.

Despite the hype on talk radio and cable television, this isn't about illegal immigration. Two juveniles were also arrested, and authorities have issued a warrant for a fourth suspect, 24-year-old Rodolfo Godinez, who is apparently a lawful permanent resident.

Nonetheless, something went terribly wrong here. Due to his undocumented status, Carranza should have been considered by the criminal justice system as an automatic flight risk and never let out on bail on those earlier offenses. The judges in those cases must answer for that.

But the Newark police also have much for which to answer. Federal immigration officials are used to being on the defensive. But they insist that they never heard of Carranza until this became a national story. Why weren't federal officials told that Newark authorities had, in their custody, an illegal immigrant who was charged with some horrible crimes? If they had been, experts say, a hold could have been placed on him so they couldn't go off and wreck more havoc and destroy even more lives.

That piece of the puzzle has prompted the usual suspects in the anti-immigration chorus to try to turn this tragedy into an indictment of so-called sanctuary policies - municipal undertakings where local law enforcement authorities aren't required to check the immigration status of someone arrested, let alone inform federal officials of the arrest.

We've been critical of these policies before, and these circumstances certainly do nothing to change our minds. But, with all respect, that is not what this case is really about. It's about bureaucratic ineptitude and the inefficiency of the criminal justice system. It's about good and evil, and how we should handle the most heinous and unrepentant of criminals. And it's about immeasurable loss and three lives whose full potential will never be realized.

Let's not lose sight of that in the fog of the never-ending debate over illegal immigration.

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